Variations On A Theme Of Chopin

No great pianist of the last hundred years has devoted more time, thought and space to the exploration of piano technique than Alfred Cortot. **Michael Stembridge-Montavont** reflects on one of the most valuable of his many publications

Les Principes Rationels de la Technique Pianistique (The Rational Principles of Piano Technique) is a series of exercises compiled by Cortot in 1928, aimed at devising a piano method around the works of Chopin. He had already published some of the 76 volumes of study editions devoted to the masterpieces of Chopin, Schumann, Liszt, Weber and Mendelssohn. Among them are those of the Chopin Études Op 10 (1915) and Op 25 (1916), as well as the 24 Préludes (1926). From a purely technical point of view, these volumes are the most useful of the entire series. In many respects, the *Rational Principles* are a distillation of these earlier study editions, and Cortot reminds readers that specific exercises had already been recommended in these. While the study edition of the Études tended to concentrate almost exclusively on providing solutions to technical problems, later editions were written also to stimulate the pianist's imagination, as well as providing advice on overcoming technical difficulties.

For Cortot, one inspiration for the *Rational Principles* is the Age of the Enlightenment and particularly the influence of Jean-Philippe Rameau. He considered that the best contemporary pianists, in terms of the subtlety and range of colour in their playing, were those who had embraced as the basis of their technique the simple, clear and modest rules of Rameau given in his essay 'de la Méchanique des doigts sur le Clavessin'. Cortot believed that well-meaning teachers and the most talented pupils had been mistaken in overlooking these rules at the expense of an orchestral colour where any sound was permissible. He also felt that qualities originally considered as essential in Rameau's time were now regarded as secondary.

The very title *Rational Principles* could be seen as a throwback to the Enlightenment, in which Cortot attempted to clarify and methodically rationalise the whole problem of playing the piano. In that sense, the *Rational Principles* could be considered an encyclopædia of piano technique in the manner of Diderot.

Cortot had a direct link with the 'Clavecinistes' tradition passed on to him by Louis Diémer, one of his teachers at the Paris Conservatoire. Cortot said of him that his playing was chiefly characterised by the clarity of a Claveciniste. The fingerings suggested by Cortot in the study editions often reflect this tradition.

The major influence in the *Rational Principles*, of course, is Chopin and his teaching: 'All the compositions of Chopin are of value in the education of a pianist, for no one has made more of the resources of the instrument and at the same time in a more musical way.'

As well as acquiring many original Chopin manuscripts, including one of the drafts made by the composer for his own piano method, Cortot was in direct contact with many former students of Chopin: 'My teachers' generation put me in direct relation with the golden age (Grande Époque). Through Mme Camille Dubois, Mathias and Decombes, I knew Chopin.'

Like Chopin, who described his Études as exercises for his own use, Cortot admits to a similar motivation: 'You must realise, that I devised this method to correct my own weaknesses. Let it be said in passing that it has enabled me to make the most significant progress. But one has to devote a good hour to it each morning', (*Gavoty: Alfred Cortot*, Buchet Chastel, 1995). He does, however, make concessions to different hands and individual technical problems. For example, the section on finger stretches is divided into two sections, one for pianists with long fingers and one for those with short fingers.

In his introduction to the *Rational Principles*, Cortot notes that one of the major advances in the piano teaching of his time was the substitution of a mindless and long-winded repetition of a difficult passage by a logical analysis of the difficulty. He devised an axiom which prefaces the *Rational Principles* and all the study editions : 'Travaillez, non point le passage difficile, mais la difficulté qu'il contient, ramenée à son principe élémentaire'. ('Not to practice the difficult passage as such, but to isolate the particular difficulty it presents, reduced to its fundamentals'.) Later on, he says 'it is the manner in which one practises the exercises, not their content as such, which confers on them their special value'. This recalls a well-known French teacher's adage that 'all exercises are beneficial so long as one practises them in the right way'!

As Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger notes in his book *Frederic Chopin: Esquisses pour une Méthode de Piano* (Flammarion, 1993), this axiom of practising – trying to isolate the inherent difficulty in a passage rather than repeating it ad nauseam - is reminiscent of Chopin's teaching.

For Tellefsen – one of Chopin's most important pupils and in some respects the torch-bearer of his method, 'The object of the exercises is not to learn to play this or that particular passage or passages, but to form the hand into a fine and accomplished instrument capable of playing all comparable difficulties that derive from a model exercise.' He reiterates: 'It is not the exercise, per se, that one practices, but the development of the hand by means of it'.

Cortot divides the technical problem of playing the piano into five categories. His aim in the book being the assimilation of the principle of each difficulty practised in isolation:

1 Evenness (égalité), independence and mobility of the fingers – without any displacement of the hand.
2 Passage of the thumb (scales/arpeggios). This section is largely drawn from Cortot's analysis of the Chopin Étude Op 10 No 8.
3 Double notes and polyphonic playing.
4 Finger stretches. This section is partly an expanded version of the technical analysis of the Prelude by Chopin Op 28 No 5.
5 Wrist technique. Here, Cortot stresses the importance of the wrist and the idea that it is the wrist that drives the fingers. He takes the analogy of a motor car where the motor propels the wheels rather than the other way around. This category includes a section on playing octaves taken from Cortot's analysis of the Chopin Étude Op 25 No 9.

Included in the *Rational Principles* is an

extensive, though not exhaustive, list of piano compositions rated in terms of their level of difficulty and the particular technical difficulties they present in relation to the five technical categories he devised. In these, the piano works of Chopin are considered to be the most useful from a technical and musical point of view.

At the end of the book, Cortot gives one final piece of advice. Experience has shown him that the best way to encourage progress in piano students is for them to study a work well above their level of playing. One should not, however, insist on a perfect performance of this piece and it should be renewed frequently. On the other hand, one should insist on an irreproachable performance of all works at or below a particular student's level of playing.

In 1936, well after he had written the *Rational Principles*, Cortot acquired, as mentioned, the manuscript of sketches for a piano method by Chopin at an auction in London. He subsequently analysed these drafts in his book *Aspects de Chopin* (Albin Michel, 1949). As quoted by Eigeldinger, Cortot admitted to Paul Roës that the method envisaged by Chopin was diametrically opposed to his own. In fact, there are many similarities between the two.

One similarity lies in the division of the technical difficulties involved. Chopin distinguishes three types, from which all others follow. To simplify, Chopin analyzes:

1 Scales (both chromatic and diatonic). It appears that Chopin envisaged the writing of exercises based on trills in this category of difficulties.
2 Arpeggios – the paradigm for Chopin being the arpeggio of the diminished seventh chord, but this category apparently includes all possible leaps (sauts).
3 Chords and polyphonic playing.

Eigeldinger comments that Chopin's analysis was a radical simplification of the technical difficulties. The same could be said of Cortot.

A second similarity is the emphasis on the importance of the wrist. Cortot writes: ' … the role of the wrist in producing the quality and subtlety of sound cannot be underestimated.' For Chopin: 'The action of the wrist is analogous to taking breath in singing'. (*Chopin – Pianist and Teacher, as seen by his pupils*, Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger, Cambridge University Press, 1986).

Compare also their views on the position of the arm. Cortot: the arm must follow a ' … natural line, avoiding any awkward angles which might paralyse the muscles in the forearm and hand.' Chopin: 'A supple hand; the wrist, the forearm, the arm, everything will follow the hand in the right order'.

The importance of fingering is yet another point in common, which Cortot probably acquired from his contacts with former pupils of Chopin, as well as his acquisition of many original Chopin manuscripts. In the study editions he includes Chopin's own fingering, although he often suggests alternative fingering as the best solution. The most valuable aspect of the study editions could be seen as the fingerings Cortot suggests.

This brings to mind Chopin's remark: 'The key is to know how to finger properly' ('le tout, c'est de savoir bien doigter') – an idea taken to its logical conclusion by a celebrated French piano teacher, who did not charge for his lessons as such, but charged a fee for each fingering he gave!

Witness the fingering Cortot suggests for the Chopin Étude Op 25 No 6 in double thirds, below.

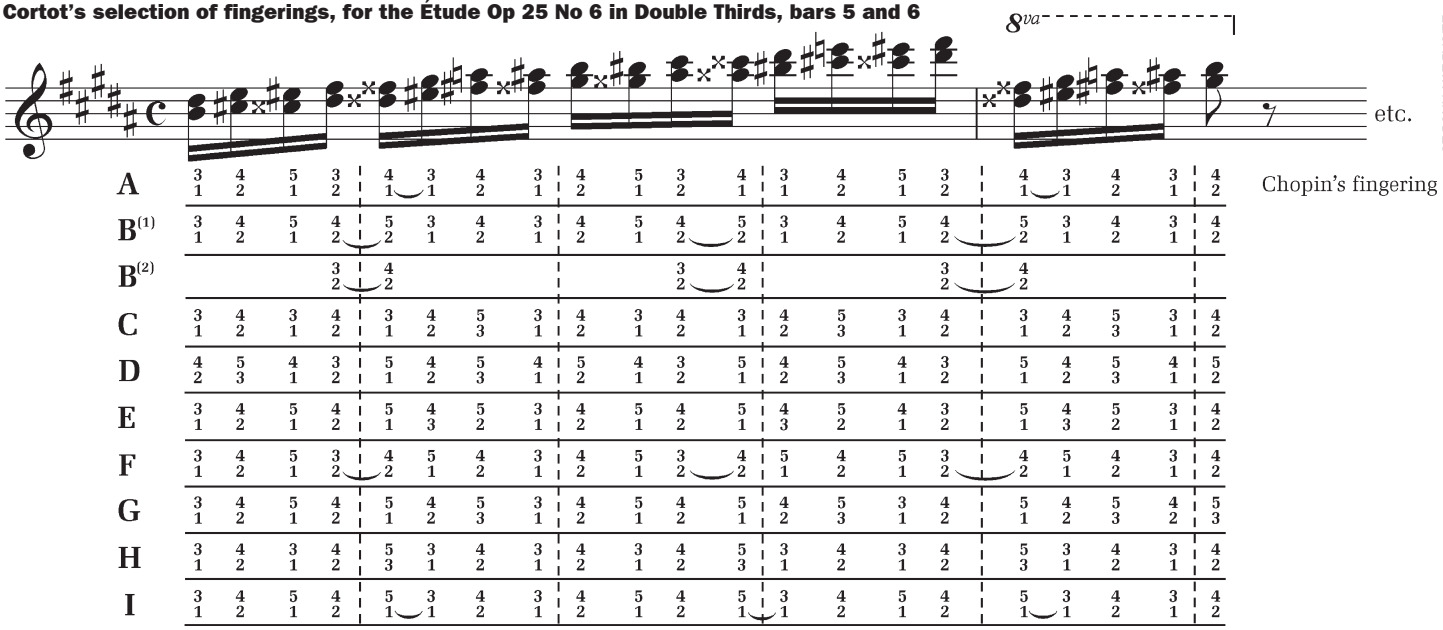
However, it is clear that Cortot in his own playing often took another fingering altogether, as observed by Thomas Manshardt in *Aspects of Cortot* (Appian Publications & Recordings, 1994). This has been confirmed to me by other Cortot pupils. It brings to mind a saying of Cortot's: 'One must be intelligent to use an example as a source of inspiration; and very stupid to copy it.' ('Il faut être intelligent pour s'inspirer d'un exemple; et très sot pour l'imiter.')

In some ways, Cortot's approach to playing the piano can be seen as an intellectualisation in the French tradition of the whole problem, characterised as 'je pense donc je fais' (I think, therefore I do). Cortot writes: 'There are no insurmountable physical obstacles to playing the piano if the nature of the difficulty is clearly defined and one appeals to reason and logic.' In a letter to Chopin, his father writes: 'You know that the mechanics of piano-playing occupied little of your time and that your mind was busier than your fingers'. (Eigeldinger, 1986). Having said that, the use of a non-intellectual image – poetic or not – to aid artistic interpretation was widely used by Cortot in his teaching and is much in evidence in the study editions.

And to end, one final quote from Cortot: 'Il faut posséder la technique pour l'oublier et la mettre au service de l'interprétation.' ('You must have the technique before you are able to forget it and use it to interpret').

Following studies with Jean Micault (Alfred Cortot's former assistant), Michael Stembridge-Montavont has organised a piano course (www.normandypianocourses.com) for the past six years offering an introduction to the piano method of Alfred Cortot.

Cortot's selection of fingerings, for the Étude Op 25 No 6 in Double Thirds, bars 5 and 6



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